

Running from your Problems and Smack into God -- Genesis 28

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As we near the end of our studies in Genesis, the affairs of the family of Abraham may have gotten a bit too long and intertwined, and we may have taken too many breaks for you to remember just what is now going on. It's like viewing the final season of the TV series "The Good Wife" while no longer remembering how everyone got into the mess that they are all currently in. That's a good description of what's going on in the lives of this Biblical family. In fact I have always wondered why soap opera writers haven't co-opted the stories of the Patriarchs for a television series except that parts of these true stories may even be too racy for television.

So let's quickly do a review of the history of Abraham leading up to Jacob's now running for his life away from his vengeful murderous twin brother Esau.

A long time ago, God contacted a 75-year-old man named Abram (and later changed his name to Abraham) and promised him that if he would go to a distant land that God would show him, God would give him that land; he would also give him heirs who would grow into a great nation, which would eventually bless all the peoples of the world.

Abraham believed God, went to the land, had multiple adventures, got very rich, and 25 years later his wife Sarah gave birth to a single child, a boy named Isaac through whom God's promise would go forward. But before Isaac's birth, in trying to help God out, Abraham had another child, Ishmael, by his wife's Egyptian slave Hagar. Friction between Sarah and Hagar caused such division in the family that Abraham was forced to send Ishmael and his mother away. After this happens, God appeared to Hagar and promised her that Ishmael, as Abraham's son, would also grow into a great nation but he would always be a thorn in the side of his neighbors and especially the descendants of his half-brother Isaac; a truth at the root of the troubles that continue even to this day pitting the Muslims against the Jews.

So when Isaac grew up, he inherited not only Abraham's estate but also God's original Abrahamic promises. Isaac married his distant cousin Rebekah, and while they grew even wealthier, they also had to wait 20 years before their twin sons were born--boys who constantly fought each other, both in the womb and throughout their youth. At the time of the twins' birth Rebekah received a prophecy that while both boys would grow into great nations, the "*elder will serve the younger*," and it would be the second-born, Jacob, who would inherit God's promises to his grandfather, Abraham, not his first-born brother Esau--who by legal right should have received that blessing.

As these twin brothers grew, they could not have been more different from each other. Esau was a hairy, rugged, outdoors man, who loved to hunt, but gave little thought to anything else beyond his own immediate desires; he was Daddy's favorite. While Jacob is a Momma's boy,

slight of build and smooth skinned. Jacob liked to take it easy, staying close to home, spending his days getting what he wanted by scheming.

Like that time when the brothers were teenagers: Esau came back famished from a hunt and Jacob offered to sell him a bowl of red bean stew in exchange for his birthright. Declaring that if he starved to death he would have no need for a birthright, Esau accepted Jacob's conditions, ate the meal and forgot about it. But Jacob didn't forget. He soon made sure that the whole camp knew about the birthright bargain and that his twin would remember it by branding Esau with the nickname "Edom" (Red), a name Esau wore for the rest of his life.

But then, with the twins grown to adulthood, Isaac is determined to pass the birthright on to his favorite first-born—regardless of any earlier prophecy or any bargain—so while Esau is out hunting for his father's requested meal, mother Rebekah helps Jacob successfully to impersonate his brother in order to steal the blessing for himself.

Esau, having learned that he was once again outmaneuvered by his younger twin, true to his nature, decided the best way to retrieve his forfeited birthright and blessing would be to kill Jacob. So mother Rebekah must hurriedly send Jacob away, supposedly wife shopping, supposedly for just a short time. Little does she know that she will never see her favorite son again before her own death.

There's a greater lesson here, spanning all these stories, that we are in danger of missing, but which I promise to return to next week. The lesson is this: **God's sovereign plans and promises will always succeed regardless of any human opposition or deservedness.**

Proverbs teaches us (19:21 -NLT)

You can make many plans, but the Lord's purpose will prevail.

We've seen a bit of this truth in the lives of Abraham and Isaac, but we will clearly see this truth developed in the lives of Jacob and his son Joseph. Keeping that in mind, let us now turn to the lesson of this day which is:

that God has promised that His presence, protection, and provision will guard and bless His children for all their lives regardless of how they may seem to be getting along in the world. But sometimes we grow too comfortable to notice this, and it takes a period of hardship to remind us.

So here is Jacob, a spoiled rich kid, who has never had to work a day in his life and who has made all these plans for his future. He already had more than he ever needed or wanted, and now by trickery he has gotten much more than he wanted--death threats from his twin brother.

How ironic! Jacob has succeeded in grabbing both the firstborn's right of inheritance and the family blessing, but he can't go home to claim either of these. And for the first time in his life, Jacob is completely alone, with few possessions, no comfortable tent, and no servants to meet his needs. Jacob, who preferred the safe easy life, is now running for his life. And as the sun sets on his wilderness travels, he's too afraid to even go into the little town nearby. Instead he crawls into some hidden crevice on a mountainside and lays down for the night.

Have you ever been there? Been that alone? Been that unsure of the future? That embarrassed with your past? No one understands; no one's been this way before?

Jacob has been there. He is now out in the middle of nowhere—no motel 6, no traveling companions, no smart phone, just lying there among the rocks, trying to get through this night.

Notice something else Jacob doesn't have. Despite all his years growing up hearing the stories of God from his father Isaac and grandfather, Abraham, he never caught the family faith. While he may have inherited the rights to his family fortune, he never personally understood the truths he had been taught about God. Notice what he says to his father Isaac while impersonating Esau in order to steal the blessing (Genesis 27:19-20):

Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Please sit up and eat some of my game so that you may give me your blessing." Isaac asked his son, "How did you find it so quickly, my son?" "The Lord your God gave me success," Jacob replied.

Jacob may have grown up in his father's house, he was the direct descendant of Abraham, but he seems still to share little of their faith in (or fear of) God.

All that, however, is about to change.

Jacob may have been wide awake in all his scheming; trying to secure his own future. But now he's wider awake as he runs away from his brother and from his past. His eyes may have been open, but up until now he has been spiritually asleep and he didn't even know it. Now, a lonely destitute fugitive, he lays down his head, closes his eyes, and as best as we can tell, **God speaks to him for the first time in his life.**

And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' (Gen.28:13-15)

In this time and place of his greatest need, God gave Jacob three specific promises:

- I am with you and will not leave you.
- I will take care of you wherever you go.
- I will bring you back home.

God has just promised this unbelieving schemer His continued **presence, provision, and blessing**. Why would He give such promises to such an undeserving person?

Well the short answer is that **God's sovereign plans and promises will always succeed regardless of any human opposition or deservedness**. This is the way God works. He fulfills his promises even through broken, fallible people; and aren't you glad (because that doesn't rule you out). However, as I said, we will look into this more next week.

For today, let's just look at how Jacob's situation relates to you me; how God continues to fulfill His promises and His covenant in your life even when you don't know it.

God said to Jacob: the question is not where have you been? It's where are you going? And who is going with you?

- You were never alone. I have been and will always be with you.
- I know you're scared of Esau and your past and you don't know what dangers lurk in your future. But I'll protect you in every circumstance in fulfillment of my covenant with your parents.
- I'll even start working on you to protect you from yourself.
- And I'm not stopping until we get this done and you return to this land to resume and carry forward My promised future blessing of Abraham's heirs.

What must this have done to Jacob's identity, self-perception and willingness to believe that God could actually pull all this off?

If you are God's child, regardless of where you might be right now, physically or spiritually, God has promised the same for you, His continued presence, provision, and blessing until the day He brings you home. God also made these same promises to Israel as He sent them off into exile.

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, (Jeremiah 29:11-13)

Jacob didn't know it yet, but he was walking into exile. For the next 20 years of his life, this spoiled, scheming mamma's boy would spend his days tending sheep and being constantly out

swindled by his even more self-serving future father-in-law. And after 20 years, he would return home with four wives, thirteen children, and enough wealth that he could send a large peace offering ahead to his brother Esau. All of this was according to God's plan for his life.

The moral of this story is that God has always promised His children, His continued presence, provision, and blessing. But it just may take some hard times for you to realize that you have always had this.

So Jacob woke up both physically and spiritually, became aware that God had always been with him and that changed his whole perspective on life thereafter. I would like to tell you that Jacob from thence forward was a model citizen, a perfect husband, and a fair and honorable father. Sadly he is still less than perfect. But now, though he is less than perfect, he has a consciousness of his relationship and reliance upon God. And that does change everything about his life. Whether he knows it or not, even in the upcoming hard times, Jacob is being blessed.

And maybe God is working the same thing in your life as well. For too long you've walked around, done your thing with no attention to God's presence or power in your life. You've worked hard and played harder, the entire time ignoring the gentle, constant love of God calling you back to him. Until, perhaps now, you're walking through a time of lonely travel, where the only comfort you can find is a rock for a pillow. And as you try to find some rest, God interrupts your dreams to make Himself known. Maybe God is trying to wake you up as well.

In his letter to the young Church at Ephesus, Paul talks about their very existence, by their faith in Jesus Christ, being changed from darkness to light and ordering them to wake up and stay awake: *For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. ... Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.*" (Ephesians 5:8-14)

Let's return for a moment to Jacob's story.

Waking up the next morning, knowing that he has now personally met God, what does Jacob do? He marks the encounter, and he makes a vow.

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ...naming that place Bethel (The house of the Lord), Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely [return] one-tenth to you. (Genesis 28:18-22).

If you, like Jacob, have been spiritually sleep walking, now is a good time to wake up, discover God who has always been in your life. And I suggest, like Jacob, that you mark the moment by making a vow to, from now on, stay spiritually awake.

Let me quickly share with you the end of this portion of Jacob's story. After over 20 years of slave labor for his greedy father-in-law, but recognized both by himself and everyone else around that he has truly been blessed by God, Jacob now heeds God's command to return home. On the way home, still fearful of Esau, he insists on putting together, for his brother, a very large peace offering of livestock (goats, camels, cows, and donkeys). Then at their eventual meeting Jacob makes a point of addressing Esau as "my lord," and after that still keeps some distance away from his brother. Eventually Jacob settles near Bethel, where he builds an altar to *God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone* (Genesis 35:3),

So while Jacob, who had attempted to steal both the birth-right and the blessing, gets none of the immediate family inheritance and ends up bowing to Esau who had also grown very rich—because he did get all the family inheritance—nevertheless Rebekah's prophecy still came true. Esau eventually moves away from Jacob to a neighboring country which he names Edom (after his nickname) and grows his own family into the nation of Edomites. Jacob remains in the promised land which his children, the nation of Israel, will inherit some 400 years later.

Edom as a nation is eventually conquered by Kings Saul and David, and thereafter becomes a vassal state of Israel. Sometime around 200 B.C., when they are again conquered by the post-exilic Jews, they all convert to Judaism and by tradition are identified with today's Sephardic Jews.

There is a lot more to Jacob's story—but this is enough for today, especially if you are waking up to the fact that God has always been with you, to provide for you, and bless you in both good times and bad.